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NEWS RELEASE

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**PROJECT SAFE NEIGHBORHOODS PROVING EFFECTIVE IN FIGHTING GUN
CRIME LOCALLY, NATIONALLY**

***Attorney General John Ashcroft Announces Record Increase
in Federal Firearms Prosecutions***

WICHITA, KANSAS - U.S. Attorney Eric Melgren today joined Attorney General John Ashcroft in applauding the record of federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, and communities who are working together through Project Safe Neighborhoods to prevent and prosecute gun crime.

“Newly released data shows record-levels of federal prosecutions of gun crime,” said Attorney General Ashcroft. “Gun criminals are paying unprecedented penalties, and law-abiding Americans are enjoying unprecedented safety. Under President Bush’s leadership, Project Safe Neighborhoods is making a tremendous difference in ensuring that gun crime means hard time.”

A Record of Increased Prosecutions. In the past three years, federal gun crime prosecutions have increased by 68 percent. Between FY 2002 and FY 2003, federal firearms prosecutions increased nearly 24 percent.

Since FY 2000, there has been a 62 percent increase in defendants charged with firearm-related crimes. Project Safe Neighborhoods first set a record in FY 2002 for increasing the number of defendants charged with gun-related crimes in one year by 20.2 percent. During FY 2003, Project Safe Neighborhoods set a new Justice Department record with nearly 23 percent more defendants charged with gun crimes in one year.

Federal offenders are being sentenced to significant jail time. In FY 2003, 93 percent of defendants were sentenced to some prison time, and about 72 percent of offenders were sentenced to prison terms greater than three years.

“The President’s Project Safe Neighborhoods initiative is designed to make our neighborhoods safer by reducing the level of gun violence in our communities,” said U.S. Attorney Eric Melgren. “We do this by prosecuting those offenders who account for a disproportionate amount of gun violence or offenses. Kansas has aggressively implemented this initiative and we are achieving significant results. Under Project Safe Neighborhoods, federal firearm prosecutions have increased substantially in Kansas from 108 individuals in 2001 to 184 individuals in 2003 with an average federal prison sentence of five years. The numbers prove that those who violate federal gun laws in Kansas do hard time.”

A Drop in Violent Crime Victimization. The increased emphasis on prevent and prosecution of gun crimes makes our communities more safe by ensuring that those who abuse firearms are not free to prey on our citizens. Between 1999-2000 and 2001-2002, the violent crime victimization rate plunged 21 percent. Approximately 130,000 fewer Americans were victims of gun crime in 2001-2002 than in 1999-2000.

National Scope, Local Impact. Project Safe Neighborhoods is an unprecedented partnership between all levels of government to implement a national strategy to attack gun crime with focus and intensity. While national in scope, each community’s PSN task force is working to design and implement a local approach to combat the unique gun crime problem that the area faces. Project Safe Neighborhoods relies on a seamless network of law enforcement professionals, working in concert with local communities, who are utilizing a strategy of cooperation and coordination to prevent illegal gun use, as well as punishing violators and putting criminals who use guns behind bars. Prosecutors pursue the strongest possible punishment for those who violate firearms statutes. Community partners, through services and resources provided by PSN, work to prevent gun violence before it occurs through such efforts as aggressively educating their constituents and at-risk youth about the consequences of gun crime.

Local Successes with PSN. Jerry Lee Williams, 51, Wichita, Kansas, was convicted on November 19, 2003, in U.S. District Court in Wichita, Kansas, of one count of being a felon in possession of a firearm. According to evidence presented at trial, on July 19, 2003, officers with the Wichita Police Department responded to the report of a patron in possession of a gun at Denny’s, 4024 E. Harry, Wichita, Kansas. When the police arrived they approached Williams and ordered him to remove his hands from his pockets. Williams did not comply and as Williams struggled with the officers, a gun discharged in William’s pocket hitting him in the leg. The struggle continued and officers were able to retrieve the firearm. Williams had previously been convicted of conspiracy to commit bank robbery in 1994 in Wichita, Kansas; aggravated robbery, aggravated battery, aggravated assault, theft and criminal possession of a firearm in 1984 in Kansas City, Kansas; and second degree murder in 1973 in Jackson County, Missouri. Williams faces a minimum of fifteen years and a maximum of life in federal prison without parole. Sentencing is set for February 4, 2004, at 3:00 p.m.

David Hamilton, 33, Plainville, Kansas, entered a guilty plea on October 28, 2003, to one count of possessing a shotgun in relation to a drug trafficking crime and one count of being a felon in possession of a pistol. Hamilton admitted at his plea that on May 20, 2003, law enforcement officers executed a search warrant at his residence on South Meridian in Plainville, Kansas, and found a number of small baggies containing approximately 12.47 grams (approximately .43 ounce) of methamphetamine that Hamilton intended to sell. Officers also found a meth lab and five firearms inside the residence.

Hamilton admitted that he used the firearms for protection in relation to his distribution of methamphetamine.

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Hamilton further admitted that he had previously been convicted of a felony in Trego County, Kansas. Hamilton faces a minimum of ten years in federal prison, without parole, for possessing a firearm in relation to a drug trafficking crime and a maximum of ten years for being a felon in possession of a firearm. Sentencing is set for January 19, 2004, at 10:00 a.m.

“ATF’s joint effort with our state and local law enforcement partners, as well as the U.S. Attorney’s Office, has proven Project Safe Neighborhoods to be a continuing success in Kansas,” said Special Agent in Charge Mark S. James of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF).

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